

Book reviews

Claudia Kinmonth. *IRISH COUNTRY FURNITURE AND FURNISHINGS 1700–2000*. Cork University Press, Cork, 2020. Pp 548. ISBN 978–178205–405–4 (hbk).

This prodigious study of Irish vernacular furniture represents a revised and enlarged edition of Claudia Kinmonth's pioneering *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950*, first published by Yale University Press in 1993. Augmented with new research and richly illustrated from the author's personal archive of fieldwork photographs, it lucidly and comprehensively places objects and experiences at the centre of a compelling narrative of everyday domestic life in rural Ireland over three centuries.

Focused on the quotidian and the commonplace, it is Kinmonth's emphatic sensitivity to furnishings, rituals and spaces customarily overlooked in cultural histories of the domestic interior that forms its core strength. Scattered among detailed expositions on a wide range of furniture types, from low stools and meal chests to coop dressers and box beds, glimpses of individual lives are brought vividly (and often poignantly) to life: Connie Henderson of Carndonagh, Co. Donegal, standing next to the kitchen dresser made by her father-in-law in 1900; another (unidentified) woman makes bastable bread in a pot suspended by a crane – 'that most essential piece of farmhouse furnishing' (p. 405) – over an open turf fire in her home in north county Cavan. The woodworkers, blacksmiths, joiners and wheelwrights responsible for crafting these indispensable forms and appliances are also dutifully remembered and recorded for posterity: the caption to one photograph of carpenter Patrick Cronin's shop front in Skibbereen, Co. Cork, taken by the author in 1991, notes simply that 'he made everything from carpenters' chairs...[to] hurleys and coffins, including his own' (p. 25).

Given that few items of country furniture were created 'to serve only a single purpose' (p. 12), sustainability, adaptability and economy are recurring themes. Throughout, Kinmonth's consideration of the relationship between materiality, methods of construction and user experience informs her understanding of furniture and furnishings as 'social documents' (p. 7). We learn that four-legged kitchen tables were unusual in rural households, and wall-mounted 'hanging tables' (or 'falling tables'), that folded up and down as required, were prevalent across Ireland. Nonetheless, regional variations 'symptomatic of rural isolation' (p. 77) are common, and the size, design and function of these one-legged tables customarily responded to particular needs and circumstances: one ingenious specimen recorded in Ederney, Co. Fermanagh, was hinged on a wrought iron

bar and doubled-up as a window shutter. The ubiquitous kitchen dresser also served multiple purposes: surviving examples were often built into the fabric of the house and in some instances acted as structural supports for roof timbers; more often their scale and orientation functioned as a space divider, effectively creating a second room in smaller properties.

Of particular interest for this reader is the question of design transmission among a broad community of professional and amateur makers (and householders themselves), not least in remote areas where skilled tradesmen were hard to procure. On this topic the text abounds with fascinating insights and observations. Examples of vernacular seat furniture derived from fashionable Regency-era styles act as a reminder that 'woodworkers, however poor, were often involved with work in the so-called "big house", [where] they were able to scrutinise such things minutely' (p. 148). Kinmonth reveals that categories of furniture long associated with rural domesticity had their source in grander settings: the settle bed, a popular symbol of Irish cottage life, was originally a type created for servants of the landed classes and subsequently reproduced by country carpenters for labourer and cottier households. Equally, the canopy bed, so-called because of its enclosed form, boasts a very particular grammar of carved ornament in timber derived from the decorative textile drapery and *passementerie* of its finely dressed aristocratic counterpart. Vocabularies, too, travelled down the social ladder. A *stillion*, defined as 'a fixed slate shelf, inside the front door, upon which pails of milk or water are placed as they are brought from the spring' (p. 257), was first recorded in inventories of seventeenth-century manor-house kitchens, where it described a stand for casks of wine or beer. In general, furniture styles and forms persisted longer in Ireland than England, and so, correspondingly, did the language of 'testers' (beds) and 'presses' (cupboards).

Painting furniture was another routine practice, predicated on the fact that individual pieces were frequently made from a variety of mismatched timbers, and for a host of practical reasons, being easier to keep clean and as a layer of protection from damp. The bold use of colour – vividly captured here in contrasting hues of pink and blue, yellow and blue, yellow and green – was a development of the twentieth century based on cheap, commercially available paints in tins; generally reserved for important items such as dressers, colour served to highlight key items of furniture as aesthetic focal points within the home. In this context it is interesting to learn that this vibrant palette had its own historical pedigree, one nineteenth-century observer reporting how 'the Irish are Oriental in their love of bright colours' (p. 335). Repainting furniture was often related to the Roman Catholic tradition of hosting the 'stations' (religious services extending to confession and holy communion) at home.

The premium on space is another theme of the narrative and most tangibly captured in the habitual use of the phrase 'the room' to describe any additional interior accommodation apart from the shared living area of kitchen and hearth; 'the room' often doubled as a bedroom, the beds concealed behind curtains and valances when entertaining visitors. One traditional arrangement, still in use in 1988 when photographed by the author in a house in Culdaff on the Inishowen Peninsula, took the form of paired single beds placed end-to-end (in this instance for a brother and sister who slept foot-to-foot), and arranged along the rear wall of the property. (A neatly arranged row of upholstered chairs confirms its use for social gatherings.) While poorer families invariably slept on the floor, a practice common until the 1830s, they would 'lie down decently' (p. 296) with a formal separation by age and sex. Early nineteenth-century surveys also reveal some startling statistics: in the townland of Tullaghobegly near Gweedore, Co. Donegal, a total figure of ten beds (two of feather and eight of chaff) was recorded 'among a population of over 9,000' (p. 297). (As late as the 1930s, house guests at one farmstead in west Kerry were provided with a temporary bed formed by straw-filled sacks laid over a lattice of sticks arranged on the floor.) In terms of furniture, the 'three corner press' represents an elegant illustration of how demands for space saving, aesthetic display and material economy were harmonized: a display cabinet typically built into the corners of a room, it required little outlay in terms of labour or materials, 'being composed mainly of shelves and doors' (p. 263).

Drawing on a host of literary and historiographic sources, and written in a measured, accessible style, this captivating book will appeal to a wide, general readership as well as to specialists in the fields of Irish design, folklore and ethnography. Comprehensive in scope and with a judicious balance of technical and contextual material, it forms a wonderful companion to the late Knight of Glin's celebrated survey of fine Irish furniture published in 2007.

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